

Transylvania County Natural Area Inventory

LAUREL CREEK HEADWATERS

Significant Natural Heritage Area

Site Significance: County

Quadrangle: Brevard

Size: 467 acres

Ownership: Private lands and N.C.

Division of Forest Resources (DuPont State Forest)

SIGNIFICANT FEATURES: Laurel Creek Headwaters supports County-significant populations of rare plants and animals including French Broad heartleaf (*Hexastylis rhombiformis*), ash-leaved golden-banner (*Thermopsis fraxinifolia*), and green salamanders (*Aneides aeneus*). The site also supports several good quality natural communities including Montane Oak-Hickory Forest, Acidic Cove Forest, and small Montane Acidic Cliffs.

LANDSCAPE RELATIONSHIPS: The site is located east of Rich Mountain Gap in the Buck Forest Macrosite and includes the far western edge of DuPont State Forest. Sheep Mountain Slopes and Seeps and Little River/Cedar Mountain Natural Area are just to the east of the site. Rich Mountain/High Rocks is located approximately one mile to the south, and Hogsed Creek Natural Area lies to the west.

SITE DESCRIPTION: Laurel Creek Headwaters is the upper portion of a large tributary basin to the Little River on the edge of DuPont State Forest. Laurel Creek's headwater streams begin on the gradual mid-slopes around Rich Mountain and Black Knob and become more steep and rocky as they descend to their confluence northeast of the site. The upper slopes and small streamheads in the site support Montane Oak-Hickory Forest mixed with semi-rich cove forest. The steeper portions of stream corridors and upper basin of Laurel Creek are covered with mature Acidic Cove Forest. Small cascades and waterfalls are present along Laurel Creek within this community. Small rock outcrops are also present on steep north-facing slopes, and a small cliff complex sits at the upper southeastern edge of the site.

The upper slopes are dominated by relatively mature Montane Oak-Hickory Forest. The canopy is comprised of white oak (*Quercus alba*), scarlet oak (*Q. coccinea*), chestnut oak (*Q. montana*), hickories (*Carya* spp.), and black gum (*Nyssa sylvatica*). Common understory and shrub species include sourwood (*Oxydendrum arboreum*), red maple (*Acer rubrum*), sassafras (*Sassafras albidum*), white pine (*Pinus strobus*), mountain laurel (*Kalmia latifolia*), buckberry (*Gaylussacia ursina*), and occasional Carolina hemlock (*Tsuga caroliniana*). Common herbs include trailing arbutus (*Epigaea repens*), downy oat-grass (*Danthonia sericea*), Biltmore carrion-flower (*Smilax biltmoreana*), and pink lady's-slipper (*Cypripedium acaule*).

A version of oak forest with a more open shrub layer and more diverse herbs occurs on the upper slopes, particularly on the eastern side of the site. This variety of oak forest tends to be more mature and contains red oak (*Quercus rubra*) and mesic hardwoods such as white ash (*Fraxinus americanus*), basswood (*Tilia americana*), red hickory (*Carya ovalis*), and tulip poplar